

TESTIMONY TO THE
SELECT COMMITTEE ON

ECONOMIC DISPARITY AND
FAIRNESS IN GROWTH

“Renewing Prosperity in the Industrial Heartland:
An Economic Agenda for Forgotten Communities”

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Submitted by

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To Chairman Himes and Members of the House Select Committee on Economic Disparity and Fairness in Growth, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony today. I want to especially thank Congresswoman Kaptur for bringing her colleagues to Lorain County, a portion of which is located in the 9th District of Ohio. The Congresswoman is passionate in her advocacy for her constituents, Northern Ohio and those seeking to create a thriving economy and community for all. My name is Kelly Zelesnik and I serve as Dean of Engineering, Business and Information Technology at Lorain County Community College.

I understand the design of this Select Committee is based on the mission of the Temporary National Economic Committee (TNEC), founded by President Roosevelt and the Congress after the Great Depression. The work of that committee spawned significant policy reform and also gave rise to vital educational, social and economic infrastructure that serve us still today.

Community colleges are a legacy of the TNEC. Community colleges were developed under President Truman, who served as Vice President to President Roosevelt and succeeded him as President in 1945. The 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education, popularly known as the Truman Commission, offered a remarkable vision, one of an expansive, inclusive and diverse system of postsecondary education in the United States. The development of community colleges coincided with the return of hundreds of thousands of former GIs from World War II to a new industrial America. The combination of the two heralded the beginning of a remarkable period of expansion in higher education. The postwar years have been described as the third great period of growth in the history of American education, a development that took decades to unfold.”¹ Today, there are over 1,000 community colleges across the country enrolling nearly 12 million students.

Community colleges, by mission, are all about equitable access to affordable, career relevant education. Lorain County Community College was established in 1963 as the first community college in Ohio with a permanent campus. The development of LCCC nearly six decades ago was a result of a significant economic change in our community, not unlike what we are experiencing today. In the late 1950's, manufacturing giants like United States Steel Corporation, which stands just across the street from where we are today, appealed to local leaders for assistance to find trained workers to fill middle skilled jobs. The result of this community collaborative was the development Lorain County Community College.

For background purposes, Lorain County Community College is a comprehensive community college, serving more than 10,000 associate degree seeking students each year along with thousands more pursuing specific

skill-based non-credit training. Additionally, LCCC serves 3,000 students through its innovative University Partnership program, which offers more than 100 bachelor's and master's degrees on LCCC's campus from 14 four-year colleges and universities. Our student population is reflective of our open access mission:

- 75% of LCCC students attend part-time
- 25% are students of color
- 63% Female; 37% Male
- 25% over age 25
- 61% enrolled in at least 1 online course
- 84% work in some capacity (55% work 20+ more hours/ week)
- Estimated 25-30% of LCCC students are parenting while attending school
- Nearly, 50% of LCCC graduates are first in their family to earn a college degree

It is this population that has the most to gain from the efforts underway by this Select Committee. Marginalized populations who are at risk of being left behind or left out of an economy where the in-demand, high wage jobs require more significant training and education than ever before. In a telling sign of the disparities, Americans 25 years or older with college degrees fully recovered all their pandemic job losses by May (2021), while similarly aged Americans without college degrees remain 4.6 million jobs below pre-pandemic levels.²

Lorain County is no exception to this growing gap. In Lorain County communities with high educational attainment, (50% or more with a college degree), median household incomes range between \$83k and \$110k per year, with less than 5% living in poverty. However, in Lorain County communities where educational attainment is lower (20% or less with a college degree), median household incomes hover around \$40k per year with nearly 25% of residents living in poverty, over double the national poverty average. Female heads of households bear the brunt of poverty. A female head of household in Lorain County is 2x as likely to live in poverty as a male head of household and over 10x as likely as a married couple.

While these disparities paint a bleak picture of what the future could hold, we are in a time of disruption and in that disruption, there are opportunities. We have, in this moment in time, the opportunity to rewrite this narrative. Numerous studies document the talent crisis facing our nation's businesses and industries. More high skilled jobs are going unfilled while lower skilled jobs are disappearing.

Lorain County Community College partners with many organizations in our county, region and state to address this growing talent issue. Team NEO is one of our partners. Team NEO serves as a business and economic development organization focused on accelerating economic growth and job creation across our region. Dr. Marcia Ballinger, President of Lorain County Community College co-chairs Team NEO's Talent Development Council focused on this very issue. Team NEO's Aligning Opportunities report³ cites: "By 2025, 65% of Ohio's workforce will need to have a 2- or 4-year degree, or certified marketable skill in order to meet job requirements. Today, the level of educational attainment in Northeast Ohio falls well short of that mark, with only 34% of the region's population having received a 2- or 4-year degree and another 21% having some training but no degree or certificate to show for it. Although postsecondary educational attainment has grown 1% since the 2017 Aligning Opportunities report, a more aggressive pace is necessary if the region is to meet its 65% goal by 2025. Looking ahead, the post-COVID-19 economy will demand even more credentialed workers."

In order to meet the talent crisis, we must be more intentional about closing equity gaps and creating an inclusive talent pipeline to fill in-demand jobs. "As in many other places across America, systemic racial exclusion has largely separated minority communities and people of color from mainstream economic participation in the Northeast Ohio economy. Notably, this exclusion has concentrated workers of color into traditionally low-paying occupations, disconnected minority neighborhoods from nearby job opportunities and perpetuated disparities in wages along racial lines. Creating more opportunity for people of color could be key

to helping Northeast Ohio reach its full potential. Ongoing efforts aimed at closing the educational attainment, employment and wealth gaps across races are necessary to driving more inclusive economic growth. African Americans, Hispanics and other minority groups have lower levels of educational attainment and higher unemployment rates, and are more likely to work in lower-wage occupations, and earn a lower median household income than white and Asian populations.”³

Locally, the Nord Family Foundation, under the leadership of Executive Director Anthony Richardson, commissioned a study: *Racial Disparities in Lorain County*.⁴ The study, produced by the Center for Community Solutions, presents data on Lorain County’s growing diversity as well as related data of racial disparities in educational achievement, poverty, incarceration, income and careers, digital connectedness, infant mortality, home ownership and more. The report’s intent is “not weaponize to spur greater division; instead, may it be used to challenge and disrupt existing social constructs and institutional norms that continuously undermine Lorain County residents’ ability to fully access and enjoy their unalienable rights and constitutional rights, respectively.” This report is fostering open conversations across Lorain County designed to foster collective action for systemic change and lead to a more inclusive, diverse workforce.

Lorain County Community College’s Vision 2025⁵ provides a blueprint to simultaneously raise educational in our community, close equity gaps and meet employer talent needs. Adopted in 2019 and refreshed in 2021 recognizing the transformational effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, LCCC’s Vision 2025 sets a bold goal to graduate 10,000 more individuals with a credential or degree by 2025. Titled *10,000 Degrees of Impact*, the focus of Vision 2025 is to positively impact *individuals and their families* by equipping more residents, specifically marginalized workers, with the education necessary to fill in-demand jobs and increase earning potential. Concurrently, the college’s plan positively impacts business and industry by creating the most educated, highly diverse workforce that aligns with in-demand jobs.

Since the adoption of the plan in 2019 to May 2021, LCCC graduated 5,526 individuals with credentials and degrees, outpacing our stretch annual goals. LCCC is now 55% toward meeting the 10,000 degrees of impact goal by 2025. In achieving this goal, the College is committed to creating a more diverse and inclusive talent pool to fuel our economy. From 2010 to 2021, LCCC nearly doubled the number of degrees and certificates awarded overall. Degrees and certificates awarded to Black or African American or LatinX students more than tripled in same time period. We know this growth has a direct impact on our local and regional economy as over 90% of Lorain County Community College graduates live and work in the region.

As the Select Committee considers recommendations to address economic disparity and build a stronger economy, I want to showcase three promising strategies developed at Lorain County Community College to consider scaling for greater impact.

#1. Learn and Earn Programs that Align with Employer Needs

Lorain County Community College partners closely with industry partners to ensure our academic programs align with changing jobs, where students learn in applied settings. LCCC is a founding partner of the Lorain County Manufacturing Sector Partnership, which is focused on the evolving needs of industry in terms of supplying a talented workforce. LCCC has experienced great success with developing robust learn and earn programs that engage industry in the program design and delivery. Our first learn and earn program was in the area of Mechatronics Technology – Micro Electromechanical Systems (MEMS). MEMs refer to embedded microelectronics that make products smart and can be found in consumer goods like cell phones and cars along with advanced energy technologies, biomedical devices and more. With the input and commitment of over 70 industry partners, LCCC’s MEMS program provides a stackable credential pathway from a short-term certificate (which can be completed in 16 weeks) to a one-year certificate to associate degree and now an applied bachelor’s degree in microelectronic manufacturing offered by Lorain County Community College.

After just 16 weeks and earning a short-term certificate, students are placed in paid internships working on location at industry partner sites for the rest of their degree program. Students work three days a week and attend class and lab at LCCC two days a week. Since developing the program, 100% of graduates are employed in their field and with an associate degree, students can earn \$60k to \$65k year.

In 2018, LCCC became the first community college in Ohio to be approved to deliver an Applied Bachelor of Science Degree in Microelectronic Manufacturing. The full bachelor's degree program is delivered at a total cost of \$15,000 for all four years. During their internship experience, students will earn a minimum of \$18,000. The program delivers a strong return on investment for both students and employers alike. In 2021, LCCC celebrated the first graduates of this applied bachelor's degree: Brandon Filker, DeAndre Lurry and Jared Dumont. (See Figure 1).

Two weeks ago, Lorain County Community College announced the development of its second applied bachelor's degree in the area of Smart Industrial Automation Technology. The degree program was developed in the same way with industry at the table and includes an embedded earn and learn requirement. The program focuses on integrating, operating, modifying and troubleshooting smart manufacturing systems based on "off-the-shelf" industrial equipment directly related to smart manufacturing. Thank you, Congresswoman Kaptur for being part of this announcement which took place at Lorain County's kick-off to Manufacturing Month.

Manufacturing has been and will continue to be a bedrock of Ohio's economy. We are a community of inventors and makers. Manufacturing has dramatically changed over the decades from assembly-based to an industry rooted in advanced technology. It is this change that is prompting the urgent need for a highly-skilled, educated workforce. Lorain County Community College is deeply committed to working with industry partners to create the talent needed by manufacturers to keep them competitive in a global economy. Based on the success of LCCC's initial learn and earn programs, the college is making a strategic effort to redesign all of our applied programs in this manner.

LCCC is deeply grateful for the federal support Ohio received from grants such as the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCT) (2014) and the U.S. Department of Labor's Scaling Apprenticeship through Sector-Based Strategies (2019), which allowed not only Lorain County Community College to pursue these talent innovations, but the 23 higher education partners who are part of these grants. Lorain County Community College is proud to serve in a leadership role with both of these programs, serving as fiscal agent for both federal grants totaling \$27 million and standing up a sustainable collaboration titled Ohio TechNet that is a ready-made partner for employers and associations like the Ohio Manufacturing Association (OMA) to address talent needs.

Recommendation: The pandemic has accelerated the need to address the issues of the talent pipeline. We've established a strong foundation through the support of federal programs like TAACCT but know there is much more to be done, especially post-pandemic. The TAACCT is now expired. We encourage Congress to renew support of this proven program. This funding is essential to help the nation recover from the economic dislocation of the pandemic and address ongoing skills gaps and build a more inclusive workforce within these in-demand, high wage jobs.

Figure 1: Example of Value of Learn and Earn

Brandon Filker, DeAndre Lurry and Jared Dumont are the first three graduates of LCCC's bachelor's degree in microelectronic manufacturing (MEMS)

None of them came to LCCC knowing exactly what they wanted to do, but all three are leaving with on-the-job experience, endless opportunities for growth, and a more confident version of themselves. Brandon Filker, DeAndre Lurry and Jared Dumont are the first three graduates of LCCC's bachelor's in applied science degree in microelectronic manufacturing (MEMS). It's a class they never expected to be part of, but they can't imagine having made a better career-building choice.

Dumont initially chose LCCC because it offered the most transfer credits from his time in the military. He served in the Army Reserve for eight years as part of a Combat Support Hospital, troubleshooting and repairing hospital equipment. When he returned home, Dumont got a job at the Cleveland Clinic, specializing in diagnostic radiology. He enrolled at LCCC to further his career, but felt his interest dwindling. "I was in the advisor's office, enrolling in classes for a degree I wasn't incredibly interested in, when I saw the curriculum guide for the MEMS program," Dumont says. "I changed my major the next day."



Dumont, along with Filker and Lurry, found their way to the college's associate degree program in MEMS, which had launched in 2014. Then, in 2018, LCCC became the first community college to offer a bachelor's in applied science degree in MEMS. All three enrolled. "I was going to be finished with school after my associate degree, but then I had the opportunity to be one of the first students in Ohio to be in the program, and I just had to do it," Filker says. "Now I have so many opportunities to pursue a career locally in MEMS."

Local job opportunities certainly are abundant. The MEMS program has had 100 percent job placement for its graduates, in part because regional employers had a hand in designing it. "This degree is tailored to what companies want," Lurry says. "So you know you're getting hands-on and direct skills to set you up for a career."

But on-the-job success doesn't have to wait until graduation. All three gained experience and earned an income while in the program. This "learn and earn" model is engrained in both MEMS degree programs and boosts students' confidence. Lurry has been an intern at Lincoln Electric since May 2019. He began in research and development, helping to conduct tests for the company's welding products. Since then, he's moved into the electronics area, making programs for machines on the surface-mount technology line, which manufactures the company's production printed circuit board that go into their welding products. "Lincoln Electric has given me more skills and understanding of how design processes work when developing and manufacturing a product," Lurry says.

That experience gives local companies confidence, too, that graduates are prepared to enter a rapidly changing workforce. Lurry already has an engineering technologist position waiting for him upon graduation. Filker,



who has worked full time in MEMS-related positions during his entire education, received a job offer from Q-Lab Corporation in March. He's now an electrical assembly technician, building the electrical components of the company's UV testers, preparing sub-assemblies, and soldering. "My job opportunity there came directly from connections through LCCC," Filker says

Dumont, Filker and Lurry certainly are poised to be integral parts of the companies they work for and the entire industry as they blaze a new trail in MEMS education. "Words can't even explain what this program has meant to me," Lurry says. "I don't know anywhere else where I could get a four-year specialized degree in the microelectronic manufacturing field. Not only that, but at a community college where it's affordable."

#2. Support Short-Term Training Programs

The pandemic disrupted every sector of our economy. Those working in the service sector and low-wage jobs were disproportionately affected. As a rapid response, Lorain County Community College launched over 20 “fast track programs” aligned to in-demand jobs at no cost which can be completed in 16 weeks or less. Each program embeds an industry recognized credential and aligns to an associate degree pathway at Lorain County Community College.

Upon completion, students are prepared to shift career paths, quickly and enter high growth sectors like Information Technology, Healthcare and Advanced Manufacturing. They receive both academic and career advising and connections to local employers who are hiring. LCCC’s Fast Track programs directly addresses issues of equity and economic disparity in that 84% of participants are non-traditional students over age of 25; 44% non-White which is nearly double the racial diversity of our community and 65% are female, many heads of households with children under the age of 18. To date, over 1,000 individuals have completed fast-track programs and earned industry-recognized credentials. Over 50% of fast-track graduates are continuing on to pursue a college degree in a new in-demand field.

While launched as an initial pandemic response, Lorain County Community College continues to offer its Fast Track Programs and has expanded from 20 to 35 programs with more in the planning stages. LCCC made a bold investment to offer these programs free of cost to participants, eliminating the financial barrier that often prevents an individual from even considering a new, more promising career path. LCCC was fortunate to be able to braid various funding sources from local, state and federal resources to deliver on this promise.

Recommendation: We’ve seen the value of offering short-term programs to help individuals pursue careers where salary potential provides meaningful wages while at the same time addressing talent gaps of high growth industry sectors. We encourage Congress to expand Pell Grants to include shorter-term programs at community colleges that traditionally would not qualify for them, with the goal of equipping low- and middle-income Americans with the skills they need to succeed in the 21st century workforce.

Figure 2: Example of Value of Short-Term Certificates

LCCC's Fast-Track certification program helps Simone Yalanty of Lorain turn a COVID-19 layoff into a career change.

When Simone Yalanty was laid off from her job due to COVID-19, it seemed to come from out of nowhere. “It was pretty surprising,” Yalanty says. “We hadn’t been told anything until the day of the meeting when we were told we were being laid off for two weeks.” Two weeks turned into 13. But Yalanty, 26, had decided early on to use the unexpected layoff to change careers. “I didn’t know when I’d be going back so I got in touch with the Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, which directed me to LCCC,” Yalanty says.

Yalanty spoke with Michelle Pawlak, program advisor for the college’s Fast-Track to Employment Certificates. The program is designed for anyone looking to train for a new industry quickly and affordably. Students can earn their certificates in as little as 16 weeks at no cost. “So many workers in our community have been displaced due to coronavirus,” Pawlak says. “The Fast-Track program lets them use their layoff to retrain for an in-demand field and quickly enter the workforce with experience and certification.”

Yalanty is earning a short-term certificate in Computer Information Systems – Software Development. Having all the classes online has made it easier to continue working when Yalanty was rehired by her employer and complete the coursework at a manageable pace.

Yalanty graduated in December 2020 and but isn’t stopping there. She is continuing on toward an associate degree in software development which includes an embedded internship. Yalanty might not have seen the layoff coming but does see positive outcomes from it.

“I’m on my way to a brighter future than I thought I’d get and it gives me motivation to keep going,” said Yalanty.



#3. Increase Affordability

Lorain County Community College believes deeply that we must meet every student where they are and provide the right set of wraparound services to help each student succeed. This is reflected in LCCC's Vision 2025 core value of "equity for all and in all we do." LCCC was recognized earlier this year by the U.S. Department of Education as the most affordable college in Ohio with the lowest net price of any Ohio college for associate and bachelor's degrees. According to the report, LCCC's low net price puts it in the top 10% of the most affordable schools in the nation. Additionally, LCCC received a ranking as the lowest cost option for a bachelor-granting institution in Ohio and 17th in the nation.

For marginalized workers, it's not just the cost of tuition and books that creates barriers to completing a college education that prepares them for good jobs. Childcare, transportation, food, utility and housing costs are all added barriers that marginalized workers face. One unexpected expense can derail their pathway out of poverty.

In Fall 2019, just months before the COVID-19 pandemic, Lorain County Community College launched its Student Advocacy Resource Center (ARC), a one-stop resource for students to access needed wraparound supports such as: emergency aid and connections to social safety nets in our community to break down barriers they face in their pursuit of a college degree. As the pandemic hit, LCCC made a promise that no student would go without food or access to technology. The ARC and access to emergency aid helped keep students moving forward in the face of adversity. In fact, the graduating class of 2021 was one of LCCC's largest in history.

Under current law, any portions of a Pell Grant used for expenses beyond tuition and fees are taxable, making most community college Pell Grant recipients subject to a potential liability. In the 2019-20 award year, more than 2 million community college students received Pell grants.

Current proposed legislation titled "Tax Free Pell Grant Act" would eliminate the taxation of Pell Grants, providing substantial financial benefit to the neediest community college students, while eliminating the irrational policy of reducing the funds already calculated to be needed to meet college expenses. This change would also help low- and moderate-income students attending low-cost institutions by eliminating the American Opportunity Tax Credit's (AOTC) Pell Grant offset. This offset denies the AOTC to hundreds of thousands of low-income students attending public institutions, while millions of far more affluent students and families (earning up to \$180,000 annually) receive the full \$2,500 credit. The American Council on Education estimates that the change would benefit more than 700,000 financially needy students. In addition, the elimination of the offset better aligns the Pell Grant program and federal student aid generally with the AOTC.

Finally, the "Tax-Free Pell Grant Act" would expand the AOTC and Lifetime Learning Credit (LLC) to cover dependent care expenses and computer costs. These costs are commonly incurred by community college students and not covered by other aid sources. This modest expansion would be a particularly powerful tool for adult students enrolled in job training programs.

Recommendation: Support proposed legislation – Tax Free Pell Grant Act

Figure 3: Example of Increasing College Affordability for Neediest Students

LCCC's Advocacy and Resource Center helped Jamie Morrow break through barriers and achieve her academic goals

Jamie Morrow has endured more than a lifetime's worth of heartbreak. But she says it has all made her who she is today. "Everything I went through I believe I was meant to go through," Morrow says. "I've learned to be resilient and to never give up."

One thing Morrow has never given up on, no matter the obstacles, is her education. Morrow came to Lorain County Community College a couple years after graduating from high school, but withdrew in 2008 while pregnant with her second child, Kaden. He had been diagnosed in-utero with a congenital diaphragmatic hernia, which means his diaphragm had failed to close, and Morrow was put on bed rest. Kaden lived for one month after he was born and then passed away. The pain of losing a son took its toll on Morrow and her marriage. She and her husband divorced in 2014 and a new stress settled into her life. "I was left with no way to financially support my children," Morrow says. "I was trapped on welfare and the only way out for me was to finally graduate from college."

In 2018 Morrow returned to LCCC ready to finish what she had started a decade ago. But by fall 2019, Morrow was struggling. She couldn't find transportation from her home in Lorain to LCCC's main campus in Elyria. She was also having trouble paying her monthly bills. Morrow turned to LCCC's Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC) that provides students with free, confidential services during life crises or financial emergencies. The ARC provided Morrow with emergency financial aid and connected her with other campus resources, like the Commodore Cupboard, an on-campus food pantry. Soon after, she was able to buy a car. "If it wasn't for the ARC and Women's Link, I would have had to drop out again," says Morrow. "They beyond changed my life."

Morrow finished the semester with a 4.0 GPA and in May 2020 earned her associate degree in applied business administration. And that was just the beginning. In fall 2020 Morrow enrolled at Hiram College through the University Partnership to earn her bachelor's degree in accounting and financial management. "Earning my degrees teaches my children that hard work really does pay off," Morrow says. "I hope they realize that no matter what mistakes you make, no matter how impossible a situation may seem, anything's possible."



CLOSING:

Thank you again for allowing me to share promising efforts underway in Lorain County and at Lorain County Community College that work to eliminate economic disparities and build a more diverse, inclusive skilled workforce to drive growth and competitiveness for our economy.

As shared previously, the 1,000 plus community colleges across the country were developed in response to the Great Depression. Community colleges were built for this moment in time; a time when the community college mission is most critical to ensuring every citizen has the possibility of achieving the American dream and no one individual or family is left behind or left out. Community colleges are economic engines for our communities and with your continued support, institutions like Lorain County Community College can be part of the solution toward building a better future for our entire country.

Thank you again for your time and interest.

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